Front Line

By Jeremy Mason

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Dianne

Mid forties. Has been working at the *Burrito Hut* for two months.

Mel

Sixteen years old. Just starting at the *Burrito Hut* to save up for a trip to BC.

Dougie

Mid-twenties. Front Line Manager for the *Burrito Hut*. He has been working there for about a year and been in this position for one month.

LOCATION

The action takes place in a *Burrito Hut* restaurant in downtown Calgary, Alberta. The restaurant is a higher end fast food chain that serves Mexican cuisine that can be eaten on the go. Aesthetically, the restaurant can be as literal or imaginative as desired as long as it's clear what the type of restaurant is.

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Scene One

(The lights reveal the front counter to a "Burrito Hut" restaurant. Around the workspace there are several homemade signs that read, "No talking" and "Lost? Look to your buddy" and "If you're not giving 100% then you're not giving 100%" and "Being 10 minutes early is being right on time". DOUGIE stands at attention proudly looking out to the audience. DIANNA stands attentively and MEL is slouched texting on her phone.)

DOUGIE: It doesn't get better than this. A new day! Full of new challenges and the excitement of bringing high-quality, fresh burritos to our friends. *(Pause.)* You may have noticed I used the term "friends".

(Pause.)

Mel?

(MEL snaps to attention and stops texting.)

You did notice right Mel?

(MEL nods "yes.")

Good. Because I think that's so important. To think of our customers as not just mindless cattle that belly up to the counter to fill their guts for another grueling day at the office. But to see them as an old friend who's here to experience the healthy world of *Burrito Hut* and talk with an old pal.

MEL: I thought we weren't allowed to talk to the customers—er friends?

DOUGIE: You're not allowed—

MEL: But you just—

DOUGIE: What I mean is—

MEL: But you—

DOUGIE: You're missing the point. I want you to talk to them about what's going on in *their* life…not yours! They can share all they want about what's happening in their exciting lives and you're welcome to respond to that by asking questions and feeling connected to them. All while giving them top quality service.

MEL: What if they ask about our lives?

DOUGIE: Well, I suppose if they ask—

MEL: What if they don't ask but you can tell they want to?

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DOUGIE: Okay I think we're getting off track here. What I'm trying to get at is customer service—

MEL: Friend service?

DOUGIE: —customer service to our *friends* is the pillar of success. Just keep your personal issues out of the store. Now, this being your first day, Mel, it's important for you to really grasp the essentials of what it is to work at *Burrito Hut*.

MEL: Isn't it just making burritos and stuff?

DOUGIE: One would think that but it's really a lifestyle.

MEL: *(To DIANNA under her breath.)* A lifestyle?

DOUGIE: I think the best way for you to really excel here is to work with a senior staff member—sorry Dianna I didn't mean senior because you're old just—well yeah, you know what I mean.

(DIANNA nods.)

Anyway, the best way is working in the buddy system. So, you'll be partnered on all your shifts with Dianna here. She will be a support for you, but I think there's a lot Dianna can learn from you too. I remember my burrito buddy, Mark. Great guy. He had been with the company for four years. If it wasn't for the heart attack, he'd still be with us—

MEL: He died?

DOUGIE: What? Oh, no. He had to retire. The stress of lunch rush was just too much for him. Four years tends to be the breaking point for older employees over forty—sorry Dianna.

(DIANNA rolls her eyes.)

Well now that we're all up to speed, I'm going to let you take the reins here, Dianna. Really see to it that Mel settles in nicely. If anyone needs me I'm going to be handing out coupons to some of our potential friends. Have fun.

(As DOUGIE exits he sees a "friend.")

Hey, sir. Sir! Wanna try my burrito.

(DOUGIE exits. DIANNA begins prep. MEL takes off her apron and sits.)

MEL: That sucked the big one.

DIANNA: Mhmm.

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MEL: What's his deal anyway?

DIANNA: I don't know.

(Pause.)

MEL: 'Cause he's really annoying.

DIANNA: Yes.

(Pause. MEL walks over to DIANNA and sits on the counter.)

MEL: You don't talk much.

DIANNA: Nope.

MEL: Why?

DIANNA: Because.

MEL: That's not an answer. My mom hates it when I say that.

DIANNA: That's good.

MEL: Why?

DIANNA: Why don't I talk or why is that good?

MEL: Well, both I guess.

DIANNA: I don't talk because Dougie is an idiot and if you talk it just prolongs the madness, so it's best to keep your mouth shut. And I don't know why it's good.

MEL: Oh. Cool.

(MEL hops off the counter and wanders around the space. She opens cupboards, etc. Finally, she comes across some taco shells and salsa. She sits and starts to eat. The crunching is noticeable.)

DIANNA: What are you doing?

MEL: My feet hurt.

DIANNA: No, you're eating the food.

MEL: Yeah, I'm hungry, I didn't get breakfast.

DIANNA: You can't eat the food.

MEL: I'm just nibbling.

DIANNA: *(To herself.)* She's eating the food.

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MEL: I can hear you.

DIANNA: I don't care.

MEL: Okay, I'll stop eating.

DIANNA: Thank-you.

(Pause.)

MEL: So what should I do?

DIANNA: You can make the salsa.

MEL: Make?

DIANNA: Yes. The recipe is over there.

MEL: Yeah, but I never make anything.

DIANNA: Well there's a first time for everything.

(MEL reads the recipe.)

MEL: Eww!

DIANNA: What?

MEL: There's ungions in it.

DIANNA: What?

MEL: Ungions. I don't like them.

DIANNA: It's on-ions! You're saying "ungions". That's not a word.

MEL: *(Pause. She mouths it to herself.)* That's what I said.

DIANNA: No, you said "ungions". You sound like you just came out of the Ozarks.

MEL: The—

DIANNA: It's a mountain range in the southern United States…where hillbillies come from—look it doesn't matter it's ungion—I mean onion. See now you got me all messed up.

(Pause. DIANNA goes back to prep. She is visibly annoyed.)

MEL: Whatever man, I just don't like ungions. *(Pause.)* Does this get less crappy?

DIANNA: No.

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MEL: If I ever ran this place I would totally let employees eat taco shells.

DIANNA: You wouldn't make money then.

MEL: Yeah I would, because then they would have so much energy from eating the tacos that they would work twice as hard. See. Now that's how you get your workers to be awesome.

DIANNA: Hm.

MEL: And I'd have parties all the time.

DIANNA: How old are you?

MEL: Almost seventeen.

DIANNA: I see.

MEL: Hey, just because I'm not old like you doesn't mean I'm stupid.

DIANNA: I never said you were stupid.

MEL: Yeah, well you thought it.

DIANNA: I didn't think that.

MEL: But…?

DIANNA: But…I just think you have a lot to learn about the world.

MEL: I know lots. I know that the reason we have this stupid buddy system is so that I won't slack off. You're like a mom.

DIANNA: That's not why we have the buddy system.

MEL: See, you think I'm stupid—

DIANNA: We have the buddy system because Dougie thinks that if two employees work together all of the time they'll be more committed to each other and therefore Burrito Hut. And, if they're committed to Burrito Hut, then they'll work harder and make more money for the store.

MEL: *(Pause.)* So, it doesn't have to do with me being a stupid kid?

DIANNA: No. My last buddy was middle aged, Javier, but he got demoted to the night shift.

MEL: Demoted?

DIANNA: Now, you should really get to work because you have to worry more about getting fired than demoted. If you don't want to make the salsa there's a ton of dishes that need to be done.

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MEL: I don't do dishes.

DIANNA: Is there anything you do, do?

MEL: Tidying.

DIANNA: That's not an applicable skill.

MEL: Yeah it is. I can go around and tidy up all the little messes around here.

DIANNA: Okay do that then.

MEL: Okay.

(MEL goes around and starts to move things from one pile to another, not really cleaning anything. DIANNA stops what she is doing and watches.)

There. That's pretty good. Well if that's it I'm gonna take my fifteen.

(MEL exits. Pause.)

DIANNA: She was eating the food.

(Lights shift. DIANNA continues to prep.)

I think it would be obvious to say that I didn't want to be working in a place like this at my age. I think that would be obvious. I got married. I always wanted to. I had a kid. I always wanted to. I had another. That one was an accident. But it was okay. It completed our little clan and I was at the centre of it, the glue that held it all together. I'm not sure how much they ever really appreciated that but it was true. Now I don't want you to think I was locked in the kitchen or something. It wasn't that. It was what I wanted. I really felt like I could do it all. *(Pause.)* Before I was married. Before I had the kids. I went to school…and not like basket weaving at community college school. I took a psychology degree. That's right, I was learned! *(Laughs at her joke.)* I had my plan, I was going to be a wife, a mother, and a psychologist. *(Pause.)* But you know how it is, you graduate, you have your first, you think, "oh, I'll just have a kid, then I'll be a psychologist," suddenly you have a second, then you say, "once they're in school then I'll get that job". But you get nervous and you find something else to fill your time and before you know it you're comfortable. *(Pause.)* So, there I was, I had it all figured out and it was, for all intents and purposes, perfect. But things change. A daughter with a loser for a boyfriend; leaves the minute she's pregnant. What was I to do? You open the doors and you're there for her. Then a husband gets laid off…I'm the glue. I'm not silly enough to think that I can be a psychologist out of the blue, but I saw a posting for a career counselor at the University. That's pretty close. It's a start. I applied and got an interview. *(Pause.)* I sat there in the room surrounded by people who were younger, had more experience and…I was scared. I walked out before I

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even got the interview. Now I'm here, *Burrito Hut*. You know, sometimes you take a moment to look around and you realize you're so far from the path you can't even remember what path you wanted to be on.

(The lights shift. She folds the uniform again places it in her purse and leaves. Lights fade.)

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